

Zechariah's City without Walls

By Nene Rubrico

Between the seventh and ninth month of the second year of the reign of King Darius, i.e. in 520 B.C., the prophet Zechariah had a series of eight visions, all occurring in just one night! Now, Zechariah (whose name in Hebrew means “Whom Yahweh Remembers”) was the younger contemporary of Haggai, the aging prophet who originally emerged from Babylonian exile 18 years ago to accompany Zerubbabel the governor, Joshua the High Priest, and the rest of the Jews back to Jerusalem in compliance with the decree of the Lord through Cyrus the Great to once more re-populate the abandoned land.

But more than that, the Lord wanted the returned Jews to rebuild his Temple in Jerusalem. This was to be Haggai's “Temple of Peace” that I have written about earlier. It was to be the outward, physical symbol of a spiritual Temple unto whom the Spirit of God will want to reside – permanently, if possible. It is from Haggai 2:9 that we first get an inkling that this temple, “whose glory will be greater than the glory of the ‘former’ (i.e., King Solomon's temple) house,” will be a spiritual temple, symbolic of Jesus' body that will be destroyed but will be “raised up again in three days” (John 2:19). Later Pauline theology will further clarify that our bodies, too, have been made a temple where the Holy Spirit indwells (1 Cor. 6:19).

Thus, in the aftermath of the Babylonian Exile, the Lord said to the exiles through the prophet Zechariah: “Return to me and I will return to you” (Zech. 1:3). And so He caused Zechariah to have those eight visions in a single night.

In one of these visions, the vision of the Man With a Measuring Line, Zechariah asks the man (most likely an angel, or a “messenger from God”) where he is going. The man/angel replies that he is going to Jerusalem “to find out how wide and long it is.” (v.2:2). But in an unexpected twist worthy of an O. Henry short story, the scene suddenly shifts. The man/angel leaves, and another angel appears and tells the departing first angel:

“Run, tell that young man [i.e., Zechariah], ‘JERUSALEM WILL BE A CITY WITHOUT WALLS because of the great number of men and livestock in it! And I Myself will be a wall of fire around it,’ declares the Lord, ‘and I will be its glory within.’” (vv.2:3-5).

In the old days, cities had sturdy walls built around them to protect themselves from marauding parties and invasions from hostile nations. Jerusalem was no exception. It had massive stone walls originally built around Solomon's temple and the homes of the priests and royalty, which included the king's palace. Successive invasions by the Assyrians and the Babylonians had broken Jerusalem's walls in several places. Nehemiah restored them during the time of the Persians. The puppet king of Judea, Herod the Great, went on a 50-year building binge, reconstructing the Judean kings' palace and he extended vastly the walls' perimeter to the surrounding areas. When finally completed,

it was such a magnificent view at that time that even Jesus' disciples could not help but be impressed, and said so to Jesus (Mark 13:1).

But for all its grandeur, Jerusalem's temple and walls were completely torn down by the avenging Romans in 70 A.D. – some historians say, stone-by-stone – never again to be rebuilt by human hands.

The twice destroyed Jerusalem temple (first in 586 B.C. and the second in 70 A.D.) was seen by OT writers as the earthly pattern of the heavenly kingdom (Ex. 25:8-9, 1Chr. 28:19, Is. 6:1-3). The NT writers, convinced that the kingdom of God had come and that Jesus had fulfilled the messianic prophecies of the OT, wrote of a new temple – Christ's exalted body – as the focus of true worship for those who receive the Spirit (John 2:18-22; 4:19-24, etc.). Paul later refined this idea into the Church as “the Body of Christ” and called the converts “temple of the living God” (2 Cor.6:16-7:1); in other times a building founded on Christ within which the Holy Spirit dwells and gives unity (1Cor.3:10-17; Eph.2:20-22). Peter would similarly declare the believers as being built into a spiritual edifice (1 Pet. 2:4-10).

The idea that the New Temple are the corpus of breathing, living Christian believers embodied with God's spirit, gives it a unique kind of dynamism and movement appropriate for us today. Indeed, the book of Acts illustrates this movement – both physical and spiritual - of the Church from the first Jerusalem community (still worshipping at the temple), outward to Samaria, and at last to Rome (the capital of the Gentile world).

Indeed, with such dynamism exercised by the Church (the New Temple), who needs walls? Walls only RESTRICT and CONFINE. Walls only limit our infinite possibilities! Did not Jesus Christ say, “go and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age”- Matt. 28:19-20?

In the book of Zechariah, God gives us a beautiful picture of a City Without Walls. It is worth repeating it here. He declares:

“JERUSALEM WILL BE A CITY WITHOUT WALLS because of the great number of men and livestock in it! And I Myself will be a wall of fire around it,” declares the Lord, “and I will be its glory within.” (vv.2:3-5).

“Shout and be glad, O Daughter of Zion. For I am coming, and I will live among you. Many nations will be joined with the Lord that day and will become My people. I will live among you and you will know that the Lord Almighty has sent me to you.(vv.2:10-11).

With God as our “wall of fire,” again I ask: who needs walls?

God bless.

The Book of Zechariah was the topic of the Vespers Sunday School last November 7, 2004, under the "The Minor Prophets" Discussion Series. Nene Rubrico moderates the group discussions every Sunday, 3:30-5:00 P.M. at the GG Hall. This article meditates on one aspect of that Book.